

## ON THE "EVILS" OF CHINESE IMMIGRATION (1878)

*During the Gold Rush, about 24,000 Chinese immigrants came to California. Racial discrimination forced most to leave the gold fields. Some became laundries, cooks, gardeners, farmers, and domestic servants. Others gravitated to dangerous jobs in railroad construction and mining. Although the Chinese immigrants proved tireless workers, many white laborers resented their willingness to work for low wages and refusal to abandon their language or cultural traditions. When an economic depression hit in the 1870s, white displays of nativism escalated. In 1877, a labor rally in San Francisco degenerated into anti-Chinese riot. In the wake of this violence, a committee of California legislators examined the impact of Chinese immigration. Their report is excerpted below.*

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. How do the legislators believe that the Chinese are affecting the culture and economy of California? How might a Chinese immigrant have responded to these characterizations?
2. Why do the legislators believe that the Chinese cannot be Americanized? Was this a fair generalization? Explain your answer.
3. Compare this report to Yan Phou Lee's "The Chinese Must Stay" (Document 15.2). Which reading do you find most persuasive? Why?

**T**he Chinese have now lived among us, in considerable numbers\*, for a quarter of a century, and yet they remain separate, distinct from, and antagonistic to our people in thinking, mode of life, in tastes and principles, and are as far from assimilation as when they first arrived.

They fail to comprehend our system of government; they perform no duties of citizenship; they are not available as jurymen; cannot be called upon as a *posse comitatus* to preserve order, nor be relied upon as soldiers.

They do not comprehend or appreciate our social ideas, and they contribute but little to the support of any of our institutions, public or private.

They bring no children with them, and there is, therefore, no possibility of influencing them by our ordinary educational appliances.

There is, indeed, no point of contact between the Chinese and our people through which we can Americanize them. The rigidity which characterizes these people forbids the hope of any essential change in their relations to our own people or our government.

We respectfully submit admitted proposition that no nation, much less a republic, can safely permit the presence of a large and increasing element among its people which cannot be assimilated or made to comprehend the responsibilities of citizenship.

The great mass of the Chinese residents of California are not amenable to our laws. It is almost impossible to procure the conviction of Chinese criminals, and we are never sure that a conviction, even when obtained, is in accordance with justice.

This difficulty arises out of our ignorance of the Chinese language and the fact that their moral ideas are wholly distinct from our own. They do not recognize the sanctity of an oath, and utterly fail to comprehend the crime of perjury. Bribery,

\* In 1878, the Chinese comprised 1 percent of the California population, and a miniscule 0.002 percent of the nation's population.

intimidation, and other methods of baffling judicial action, are considered by them as perfectly legitimate. It is an established fact that the administration of justice among the Chinese is almost impossible, and we are, therefore, unable to protect offenses against our own people. This anomalous condition, in which the authority of law is so generally vacated, imperils the existence of our republican institutions to a degree hitherto unknown among us....

We now come to an aspect of the question more revolting still. We would shrink from the disgusting details did not a sense of duty demand that they be presented. Their lewd women induce, by the cheapness of their offers, thousands of boys and young men to enter their dens, very many of whom are inoculated with venereal disease, and some of our physicians treat a half dozen cases daily. The fact that these diseases have their origin chiefly among the Chinese is well established....

But we desire to call your attention to the sanitary aspect of the subject. The Chinese herd together in one spot, whether in a city or village, until they transform the vicinage into a perfect hive—there they live packed together, a hundred living in a space that would be insufficient for an average American family.

Their place of domicile is filthy in the extreme, and to a degree that cleansing is impossible except by the absolute destruction of the dwellings they occupy. But for the healthfulness of our climate, our city populations would have long since been decimated by pestilence from these causes. And we do not know how long this natural protection will suffice us.

In almost every house is found a room devoted to opium smoking, and these places are visited by white boys and women, so that the deadly opium habit is being introduced among our people....

We now call attention to an aspect of the subject of such huge proportions, and such practical and pressing importance, that we almost dread to enter upon its consideration, namely, the effect of Chinese labor upon our industrial classes. We admit that the Chinese were, in the earlier history of the State, when white labor was not attainable, very useful in the development of our peculiar industries; that they were of great service in railroad building, in mining, gardening, general agriculture, and as domestic servants.

We admit that the Chinese are exceedingly expert in all kinds of labor and manufacturing; that they are easily and inexpensively handled in large numbers.

We recognize the right of all men to better their condition when they can, and deeply sympathize with the overcrowded population of China....

Our laborers cannot be induced to live like vermin, as the Chinese and these habits of individual and family life have ever been encouraged by our statesmen as essential to good morals.

Our laborers require meat and bread, which have been considered by us as necessary to that mental and bodily strength which is thought to be important in the citizens of a Republic which depends upon the strength of its people, while the Chinese require only rice, dried fish, tea, and a few simple vegetables. The cost of sustenance to the whites is four-fold greater than that of the Chinese, and the wages of the whites must of necessity be greater than the wages required by the Chinese. The Chinese are, therefore, able to underbid the whites in every kind of

labor. They can be hired in masses; they can be managed and controlled like unthinking slaves. But our laborer has an individual life, cannot be controlled as a slave by brutal masters, and this individuality has been required of him by the genius of our institutions, and upon these elements of character the State depends for defense and growth....

As a natural consequence the white laborer is out of employment, and misery and want are fast taking the places of comfort and plenty.

Now, to consider and weigh the benefits returned to us by the Chinese for these privileges and for these wrongs to our laboring class. They buy little or nothing from our own people, but import both their food and clothing from China; they send their wages home; they have not introduced a single industry peculiar to their own country; they contribute nothing to the support of our institutions; can never be relied upon as defenders of the State; they have no intention of becoming citizens; they acquire no homes, and are a constant tax upon the public treasury....

California, Senate, Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, "An Address to the American People of the United States upon the Evils of Chinese Immigration," *Report of the Special Committee on Chinese Immigration to the California State Senate, 1878*, 8-9, 25, 35, 46-47.

## 15.2

### YAN PHOU LEE, "THE CHINESE MUST STAY" (1889)

*In 1882, popular demands for limits on immigration convinced Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act. The law greatly restricted Chinese immigration for ten years, but exempted merchants, teachers, students, and other visitors. Congress closed these loopholes with the Geary Act of 1892. The prohibition on Chinese emigration to the United States remained in effect until 1943.*

*In this passage, Yan Phou Lee protests anti-Chinese discrimination. Born in China in 1861, Yan won a scholarship to study in the United States. After graduating from Yale, he wrote *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887).*

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. According to Yan, what are the major stereotypes about the Chinese immigrants? How does Yan challenge these characterizations?
2. What does Yan believe that the Chinese contribute to American society? How does he describe those who oppose the Chinese?
3. What kind of tone does Yan use? Why do you think he chose to write in this style?

4. Compare Yan Phou Lee's "The Chinese Must Stay" to "On the 'Evils' of Chinese Immigration." (Document 15.1). Which reading do you find most persuasive? Why?

**N**o nation can afford to let go its high ideals. The founders of the American Republic asserted the principle that all men are created equal, and made this fair land a refuge for the whole world. Its manifest destiny, therefore, is to be the teacher and leader of nations in liberty. Its supremacy should be maintained by good faith and righteous dealing, and not by the display of selfishness and greed. But now, looking at the actions of this generation of Americans in their treatment of other races, who can get rid of the idea that that Nation, which Abraham Lincoln said was conceived in liberty, waxed great through oppression, and was really dedicated to the proposition that all men are created to prey on one another?...

Chinese immigrants never claimed to be any better than farmers, traders, and artisans. If, on the one hand, they are not princes and nobles, on the other hand, they are not coolies and slaves. They all came voluntarily, as their consular papers certified, and their purpose in leaving their home and friends was to get honest work. They were told that they could obtain higher wages in America than elsewhere, and that Americans were friendly to the Chinese and invited them to come....

So long as the Chinese served their purposes and did not come into collision with the hoodlum element afterwards imported to California, the people of that State had nothing to complain of regarding them. Why should they, when, at one time, half the revenue of the State was raised out of the Chinese miners? But the time came when wages fell with the cost of living. The loafers became strong enough to have their votes sought after. Their wants were attended to. Their complaints became the motive power of political activity. So many took up the cry against the Chinese that it was declared that no party could succeed on the Pacific coast which did not adopt the hoodlums' cause as its own....

Those who remember events of some thirty-five years ago will see nothing strange in the antagonism of one class of laborers to another. Opposition to the Chinese is identical with the opposition to the free immigration of Europeans, and especially of the Irish; for it was once urged against the trans-Atlantic immigrants that their cheap labor "would degrade, demoralize, and pauperize American labor, and displace intelligent Americans in many branches of employment." There was a bitter conflict, but the sensible view prevailed. For it was found that a greater supply of unskilled labor made it possible for skilled laborers to command higher wages and more regular employment.

Why is it that the American laborer was soon raised to a higher social and industrial plane, and ceased to fear Irish competition, while the Irish still dread the competition of the Chinese? It is simply because the Irish are industrially inferior to their competitors. They have not the ability to get above competition, like the Americans, and so, perforce, they must dispute with the Chinese for the chance to be hewers of wood and drawers of water....

But you say...the Chinese stand charged with too many things to make them desirable. Ah, yes! I see. But it is only fair to look into these charges before we pass our judgment. It has been urged:

- I. *That the influx of Chinese is a standing menace to Republican institutions upon the Pacific coast and the existence there of Christian civilization.*

That is what I call a severe reflection on Republican institutions and Christian civilization. Republican institutions have withstood the strain of 13,000,000 of the lower classes of Europe, among whom may be found Anarchists, Socialists, Communists, Nihilists, political assassins, and cut-throats; but they cannot endure the assaults of a few hundred thousands of the most peaceable and most easily-governed people in the world!

Christianity must have lost its pristine power, for, having subdued and civilized one-half the world, it is now powerless before the resistance of a handful of Chinese! Surely the Chinese must be angels or devils! If angels, they would go without your bidding. If devils, you would not be able to drive them out...

- III. *That the Chinese race seems to have no desire for progress.*

In the last fifteen years the Chinese Government has educated upwards of two hundred students in Europe and America, has built arsenals and navy-yards, established schools and colleges on Western models, disciplined an army that whipped the Russians, created a navy that would put the American navy to shame, put up thousands of miles of telegraph wires; and it is now busily opening up mines, building railroads, and availing itself of American capital and experience to put up telephones and establish a national bank. The Chinese are not ashamed to own that they appreciate the Americans.

- IV. *That the Chinese have displaced white laborers by low wages and cheap living, and that their presence discourages and retards white immigration to the Pacific States.*

This charge displays so little regard for truth and the principles of political economy that it seems like folly to attempt an answer. But please to remember that it was by the application of Chinese "cheap labor" to the building of railroads, the reclamation of swamp-lands, to mining, fruit-culture, and manufacturing, that an immense vista of employment was opened up for Caucasians, and that millions now are enabled to live in comfort and luxury where formerly adventurers and desperadoes disputed with wild beasts and wilder men for the possession of the land. Even when the Chinaman's work is menial (and he does it because he must live, and is too honest to steal and too proud to go to the almshouse), he is employed because of the scarcity of such laborers. It is proved that his work enables many to turn their whole attention to something else, so that even the hoodlum may don a clean shirt at least once a month. You may as well run down machinery as to sneer at Chinese cheap labor. Machines live on nothing at all; they have displaced millions of laborers; why not do away with machines?...

V. *That the Chinese do not desire to become citizens of this country.*

Why should they? Where is the inducement? Let me recite briefly a few of the laws and ordinances which, though couched in general terms, were made for their special benefit.

The Foreign-Miners' License Law, which forced every Chinese miner, during a period of twenty years, to pay from \$4 to \$20 per month for the privilege of working claims which others had abandoned.

An act of the California Legislature, 1885, laid a tax of \$55 on each Chinese immigrant.

Another, 1862, provided (with a few exceptions) that every Chinaman over eighteen years of age should pay a capitation-tax of \$2.50.

A San Francisco city ordinance, passed March 15, 1876, provided that all laundries should pay licenses as follows: those using a one-horse vehicle, \$2 per quarter; two horses, \$4; no vehicle, \$15. This is discrimination with a vengeance!

I maintain that a sober, industrious, and peaceable people, like the Chinese, who mind their own business and let others do the same, are as fit to be voters as the quarrelsome, ignorant, besotted, and priest-ridden hordes of Europe....

VII. *The Chinese neither have intercourse with the Caucasians nor will assimilate with them.*

Yes, just think of it! As soon as the ship comes into harbor, a committee of the citizens get on board to present the Chinaman with the freedom of the city (valued at \$5). A big crowd gathers at the wharf to receive him with shouts of joy (and showers of stones). The aristocrats of the place flock to his hotel to pay their respects (and to take away things to remember him by). He is so feted and caressed by Caucasian society that it is a wonder his head is not turned (or twisted off)....

IX. *That the Chinese immigrants are mostly criminals.*

It is not true. I admit that we have a criminal class in China, but the few that got over here came through the neglect of the officers of the Custom-House to enforce the laws...

Every fair-minded man can testify that the Chinese are the most law-abiding people in the community, that they are not easily provoked, but are patient (oh, too patient!) under insult and injury. They seldom appear in court-rooms in the character of prisoners. You have never seen one drunk in your life. But, you say, he smokes opium. That, I answer, is his own affair. The law provides no penalties against private vices. You have never heard of Chinamen who organized strikes, stuffed ballot-boxes, and corrupted legislation at the fountain-head. Why, then, are they not as desirable as other immigrants? Is it a crime to be industrious, faithful, law-abiding? Wrong to coin one's honest toil into gold, and, instead of wasting one's earnings in drink and debauchery, to support wife and children therewith?...

XI. *That the Chinese bring women of bad character to San Francisco, and that their vices are corrupting the morals of the city.*

How serious a charge this is we cannot realize until we get at all the facts. Just imagine California, the most virtuous of States, and San Francisco, the most immaculate of cities, lying helpless under...Chinese immorality! Have you ever been to San Francisco? Unless you can endure paradise and Eden-like purity, you would better not go there. Why, the Sabbath stillness in that city is simply appalling. The people all go to church, and if you suggest whiskey toddy or a base-ball game on Sunday, they will turn up their eyes, throw up their hands, and pray the Lord to have mercy on you. There are no drunken brawls at any time (except in Chinatown), and it is the policeman's picnic-ground (except in Chinatown).... Californians are pure, moral, and religious, in all that they do. As for having disreputable houses, or women with loose morals about them, I tell you they are as innocent as lambs. Indeed, Satan could not have made a greater commotion in Eden than the Chinese in California. One would suppose that such a model community would "clean out" those bad Chinese women. But it did not. It deputed a number of special policemen to watch them and arrest them, but it seems that these specials had the marvelous power of transmuting their brass into pure gold, and that, in the exercise of that power, they were as blind as bats. If the virtuous community of San Francisco permitted their morals to be corrupted, it is their own fault....

Yan Phou Lee, "The Chinese Must Stay," *North American Review* Vol. 48, No. 389 (April 1889), pp. 476-83.

### 15.3

#### GRANT HAMILTON, "WHERE IS THE BLAME?" (1891)

*Throughout the late nineteenth century, many native-born Americans opposed immigrants for religious, political, economic, and cultural reasons. This disdain for immigrants, known as nativism, pervaded American life. Political cartoons provided a powerful medium for expressing nativist attitudes. Publications like Puck Magazine and The Judge were primarily humor magazines, but many of their artists had pointed political views. Each reached several thousand readers every week. While Puck closed in 1918, The Judge flourished until the 1930s. In 1891, cartoonist Grant Hamilton of The Judge expresses his view of immigration.*

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. How does this cartoon characterize immigration? What social problems does it ascribe to immigrants?

